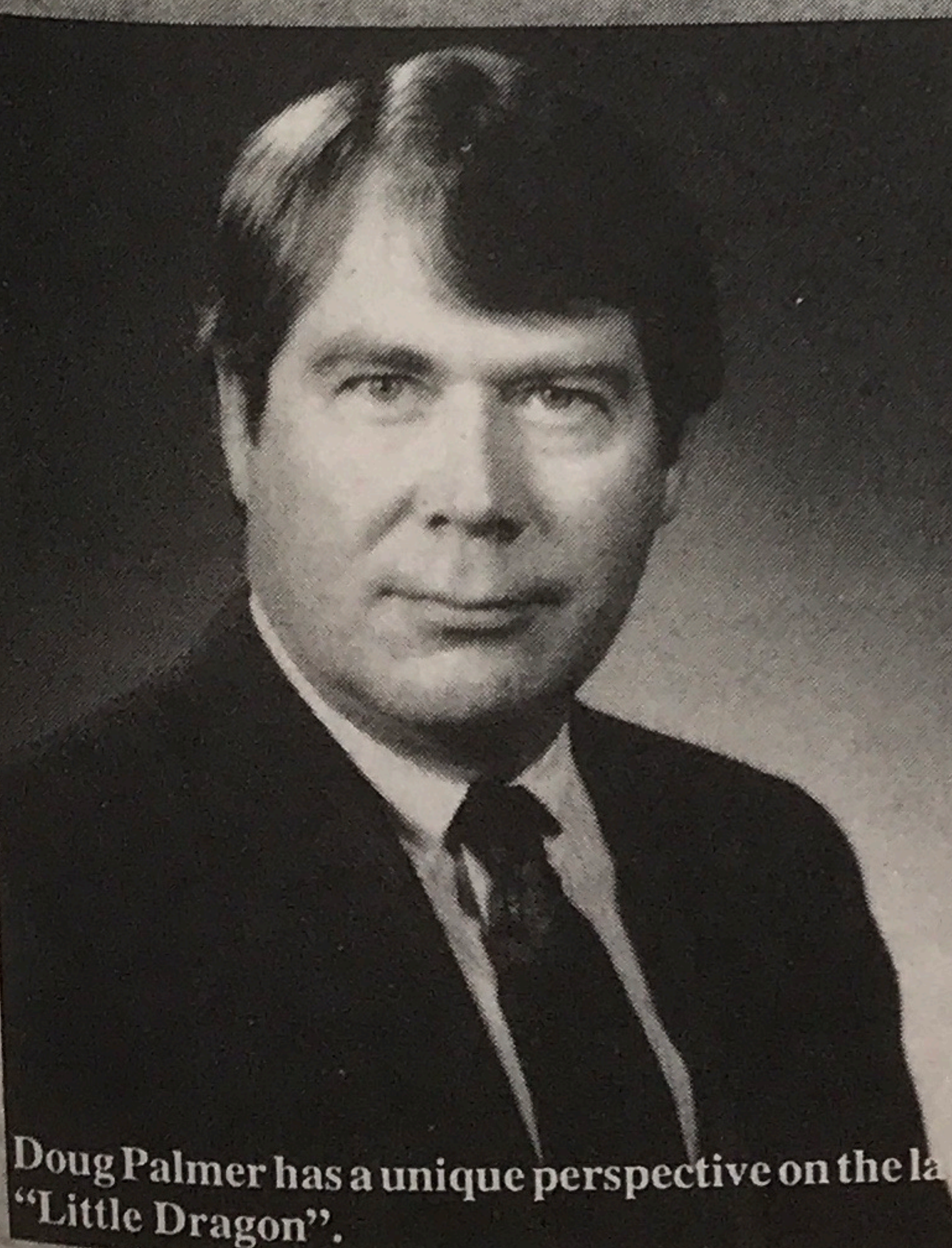




Ready to take on the world, the young Bruce Lee.



Doug Palmer (left) with Bruce Lee and friends in Hong Kong in the summer of 1963.



Doug Palmer has a unique perspective on the late "Little Dragon".

# BRUCE LEE

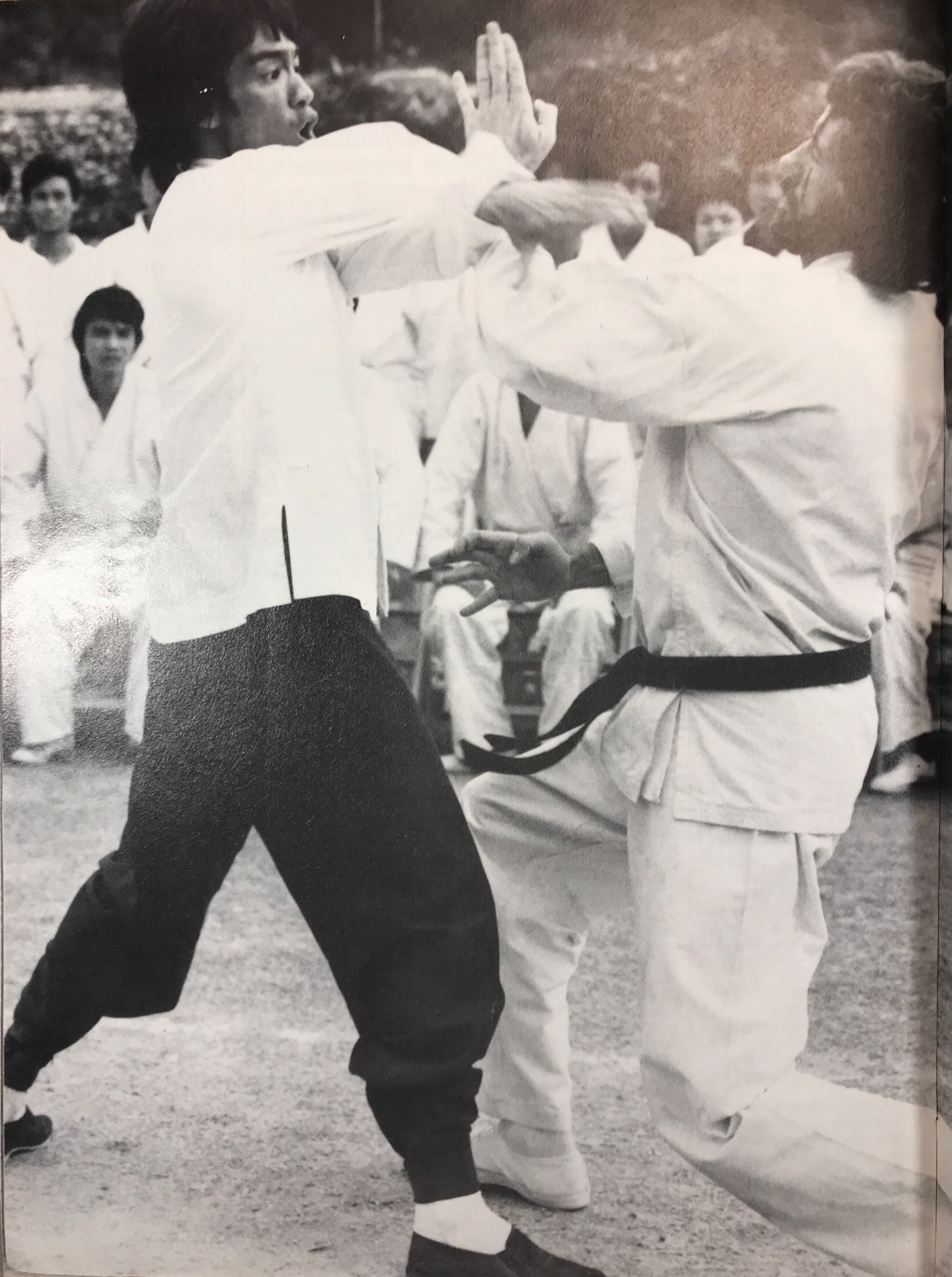
## INSIDE THE SEATTLE YEARS

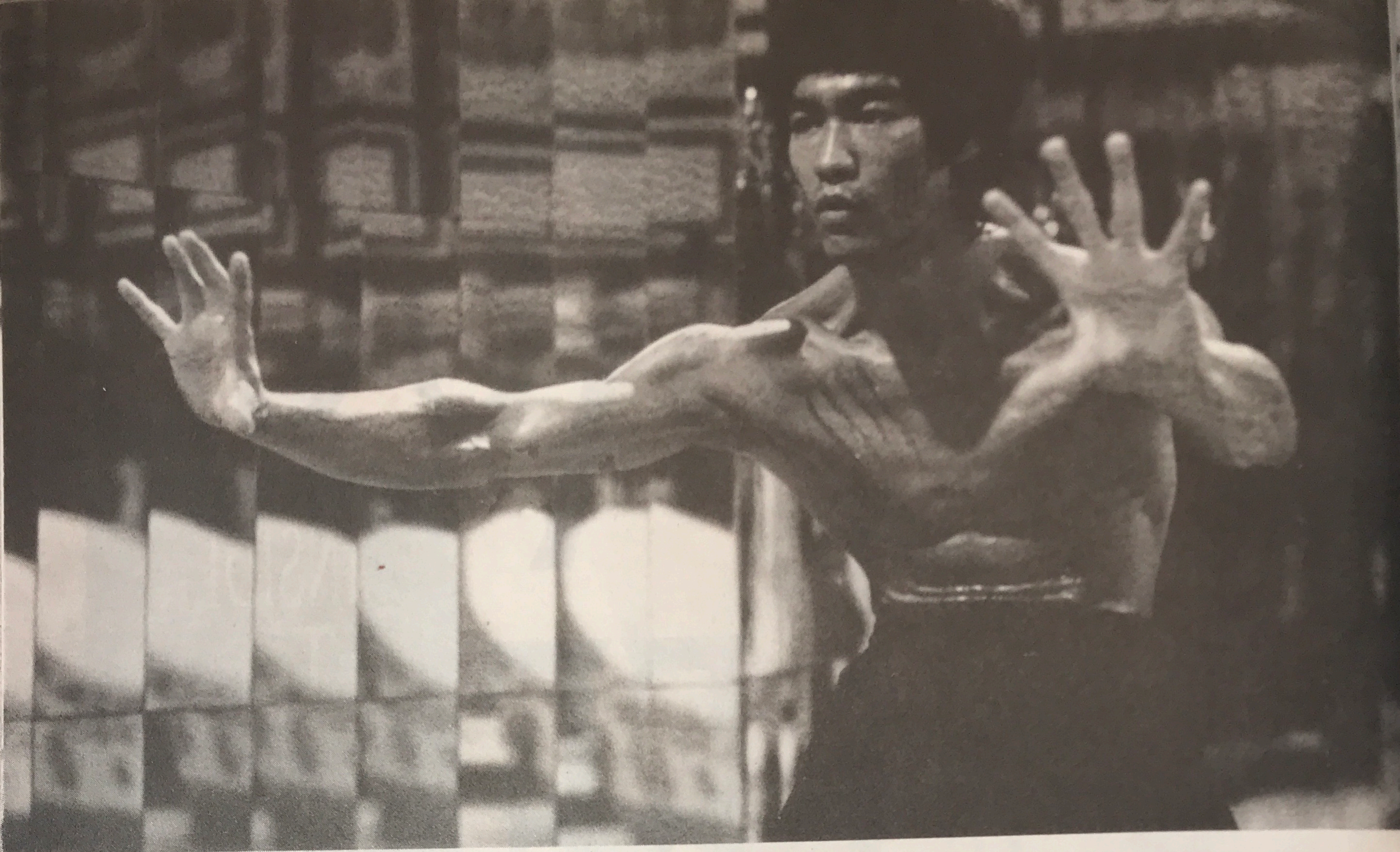
AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH ONE OF THE  
LITTLE DRAGON'S FIRST AMERICAN STUDENTS

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Interview Conducted by Paul Bax

When most people think of the Bruce Lee's Seattle era, names such as Taky Kimura, Jesse Glover, and Jim DeMile immediately come to mind. One person often overlooked, with immense knowledge of Lee's art as it was taught in the early sixties, is Doug Palmer. A lawyer by profession, Palmer met Lee before his evolution, and later experienced the art we now know as Jeet Kune Do on a trip to Hong Kong in 1972. One aspect that sets Palmer apart from any other student is the fact he actually spent a summer with Bruce in Hong Kong. In this interview, Palmer recalls his experiences with Bruce in the U.S. and in Hong Kong during the sixties, and his last meeting with him before Lee's death in 1973.





**INSIDE KARATE:** How and when did you first meet Bruce Lee?

**DOUG PALMER:** I met him during the summer of 1961 in Seattle. Every year we have a Seafair race out in Seattle, and there are a lot of community activities leading up to that event. I met Bruce at a Japanese community festival.

**IK:** What was your first impression of him?

**DP:** He had a very strong personality. I actually had seen him prior to this event. I saw him a week before at a Chinese community fair where he was giving a demonstration. I was awe-struck by his speed and power. I wanted to meet him.

**IK:** So it was his demonstration that made you want to become one of his students?

**DP:** Yeah. I told him I wanted to study gung fu with him. I had been boxing ever since the fifth grade or so, but this was something totally different than I had ever seen before. I was fascinated, so I asked if I could study with him, and he told me to come to the next class. If I was still interested, he said we would talk about it.

**IK:** Did you discuss boxing?

**DP:** Yeah, we talked about boxing. He had a lot of movies of famous fights that he watched, and studied. We never sparred with gloves or

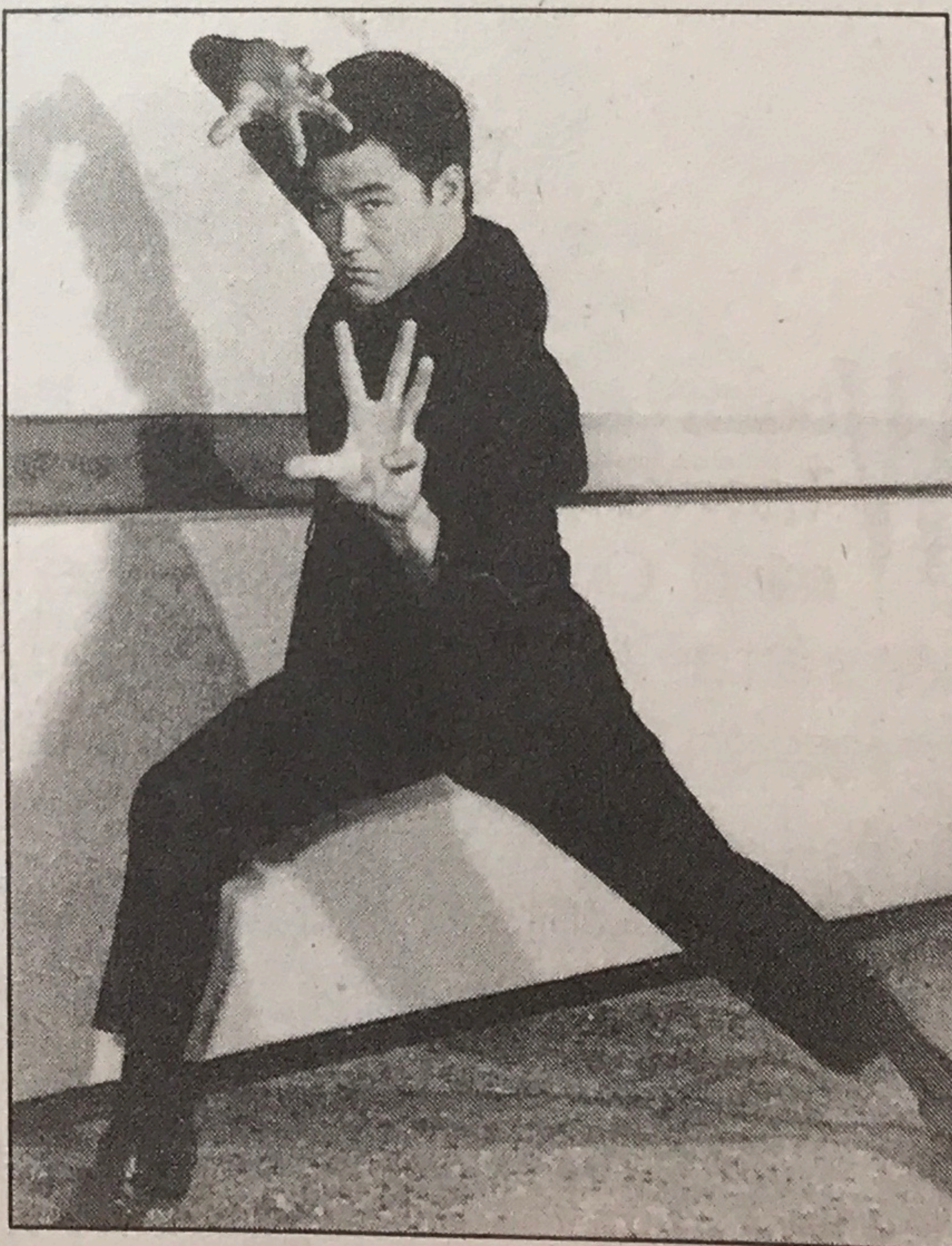
anything. He had done that in a fight or two in Hong Kong. He wasn't particularly interested in boxing (at this point in his training), and I was interested in learning gung fu from him.

**IK:** Did you have any prior martial arts experience?

**DP:** Other than the boxing, no.

**IK:** What were the classes like back then?

**DP:** It was very informal. Most of the students were older guys, except for a kid who was twelve, and myself. I was 17 at the time.



Classes were held out in the backyard of one of the student's homes. We used to go out, and do exercises, spar, etc. At some point during the year we started training in a parking garage that was close to where Bruce was living. It was covered, but it was not indoor.

**IK:** It's been said Bruce took what he thought was useful and incorporated it into Wing Chun. Was that the case?

**DP:** Yes, but the first year was mostly Wing Chun. After I graduated from high school, I went off to college, but I would come back for vacations, and so forth. It was while I was in college that Bruce really started incorporating other things, and evolving. It wasn't Wing Chun anymore. It was what he eventually called Jeet Kune Do.

**IK:** Did you hear the term Jeet Kune Do in those days?

**DP:** No, I don't recall exactly when I first heard that. It was certainly not in 1962, or 63 when I was taking it. He was definitely evolving during this time. Every time I came back he had everything he taught before, and another layer on top of it. It was not Wing Chun. He was watching boxing movies, and fights from Dempsey, or Sugar Ray Robinson over and over and would take elements from them. It wasn't like he was just taking a move from, he was doing something more fundamental than

that. He was looking at principles, or approaches he could use.

**IK:** Did you get to know Linda (Lee) Emery at the time of your training?

**DP:** I actually knew her in high school. She was a year younger than me.

**IK:** The Seattle period is known for its emphasis on conditioning the body. What were some of the training methods?

**DP:** Most of it was stretching techniques for the tendons to increase flexibility for the legs, and arms. He also taught meditation techniques, breathing techniques, rather than muscle conditioning at that time.

**IK:** So Bruce actually taught meditation in his classes?

**DP:** He called it meditation. It was a combination of breathing, and mind relaxation.

**IK:** What philosophies of Bruce stick out most in your mind?

**DP:** He was very much into the Taoist approach to things. He was always quoting little aphorisms. He chose ones he thought were applicable to the martial arts. He would try to make us have a mental approach that was consistent with them. It would help in response time. If you were going to attack for instance from a normal stance, his method of calming your mind prior to acting made you



less likely to telegraph and much harder for your opponent to stop you.

**IK:** Do you feel his teachings possibly helped you lead the successful life you've had?

**DP:** I think it's been a big part of it. He was a very powerful person, and one of the few genius's I've met along the way. He definitely had an influence on me.

**IK:** When Bruce had thoughts of opening a chain of gung fu schools did you consider teaching for him?

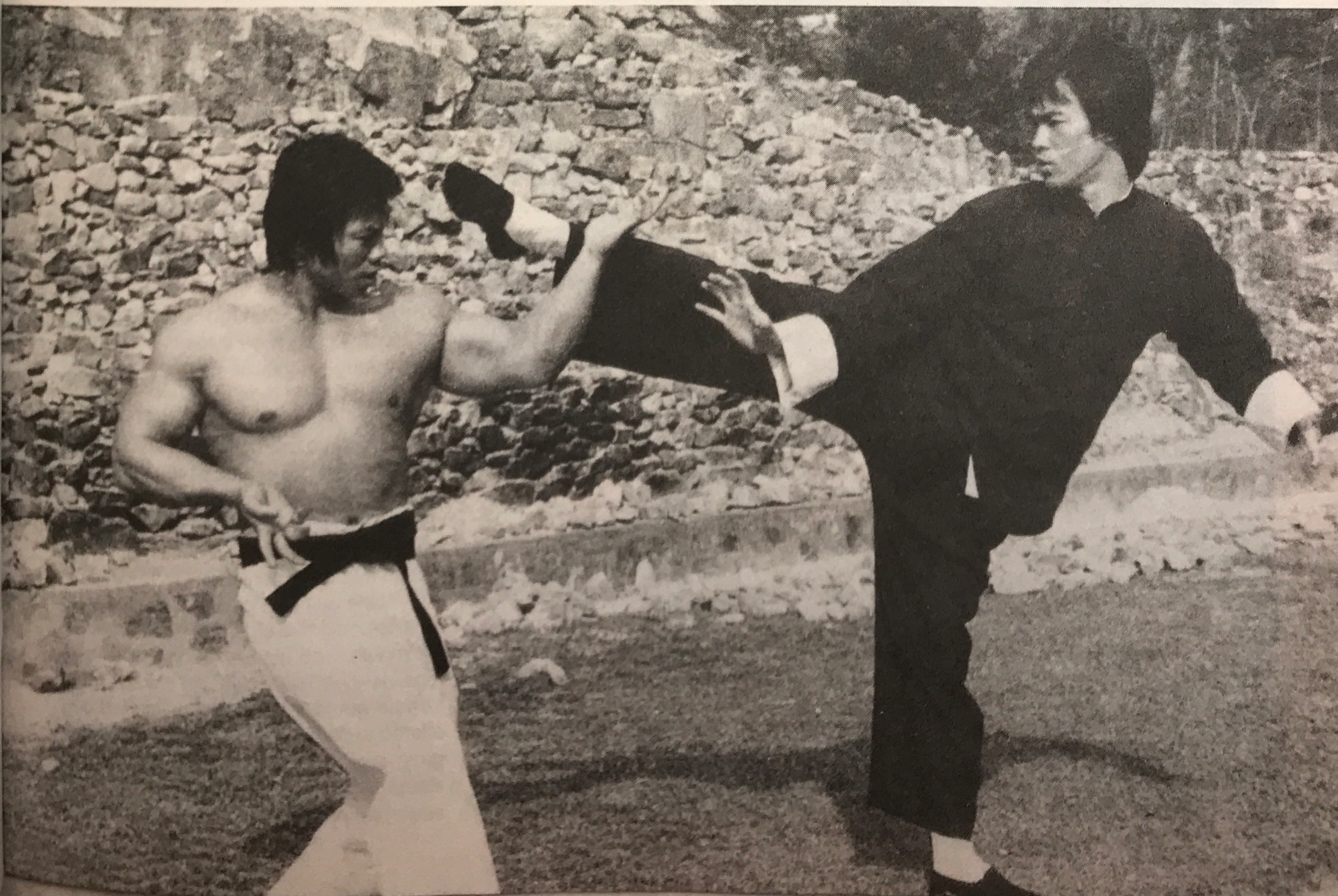
**DP:** Yeah, I did. I thought about dropping out of Yale University, and moving to the University of Washington so I could be closer, and continue to work with him. His chain of schools never really came about, but I thought about it. We discussed it. He was thinking in terms of opening schools in a lot of different places, but when he moved to California and tried to get into movies or TV, that shifted his focus in that direction.

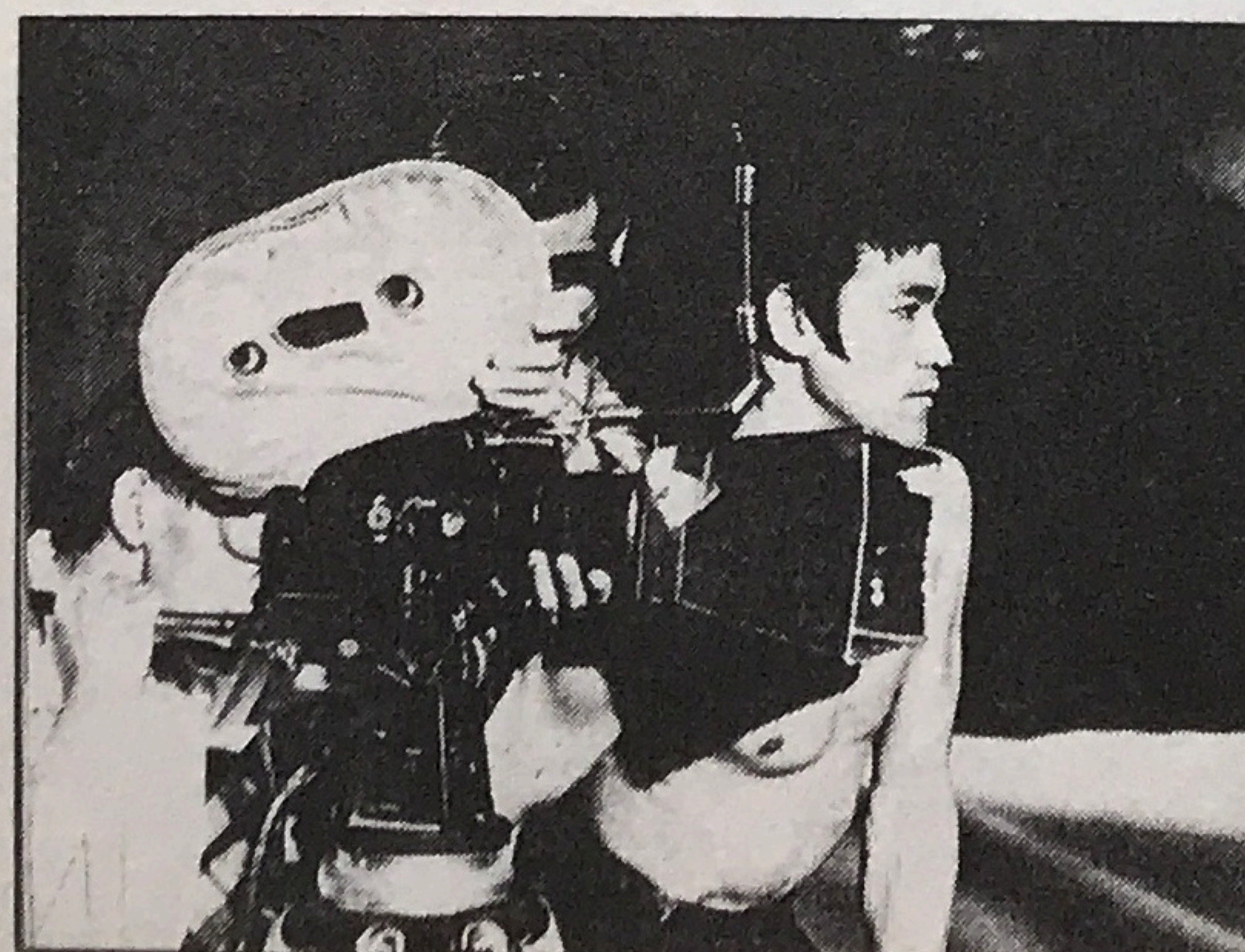
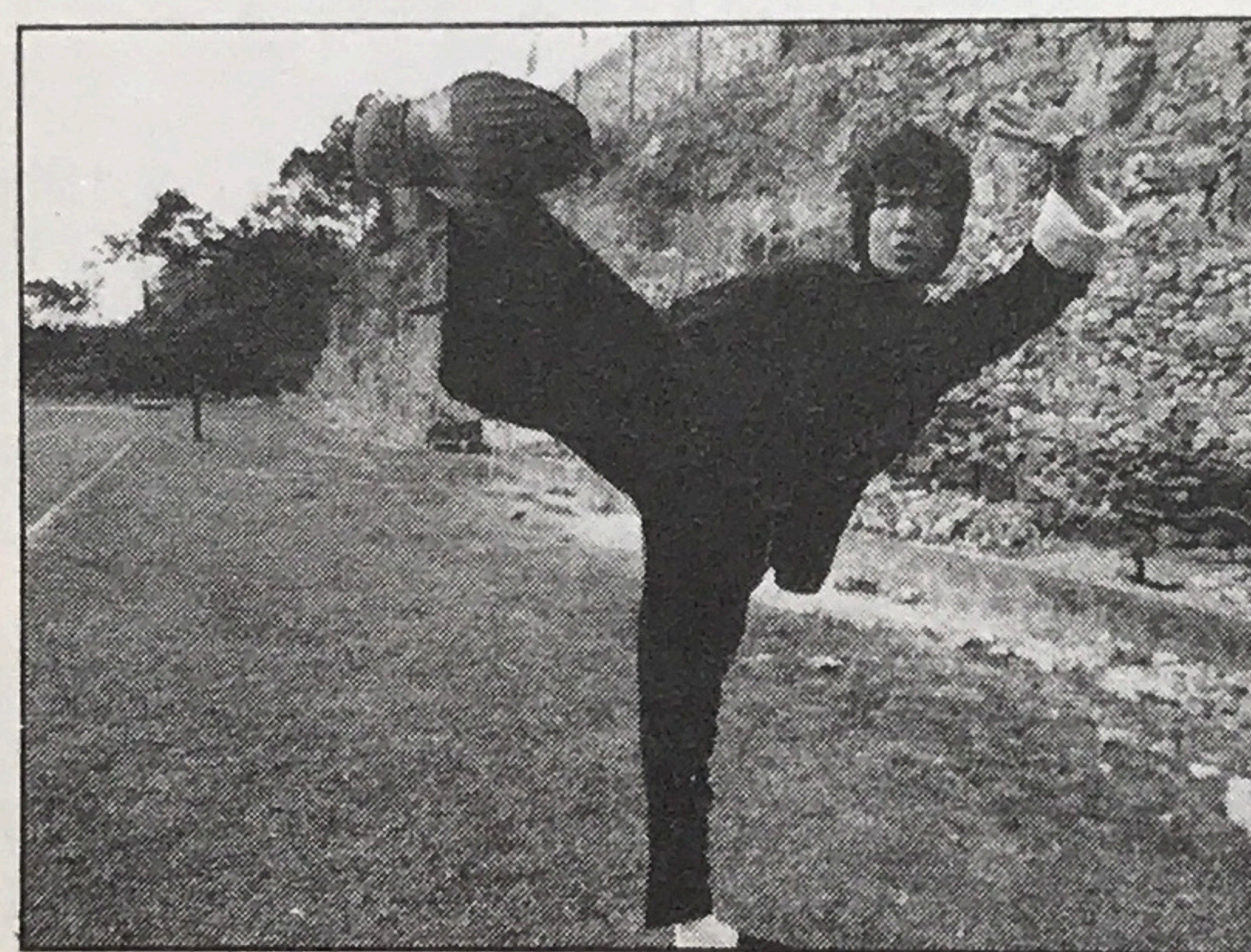
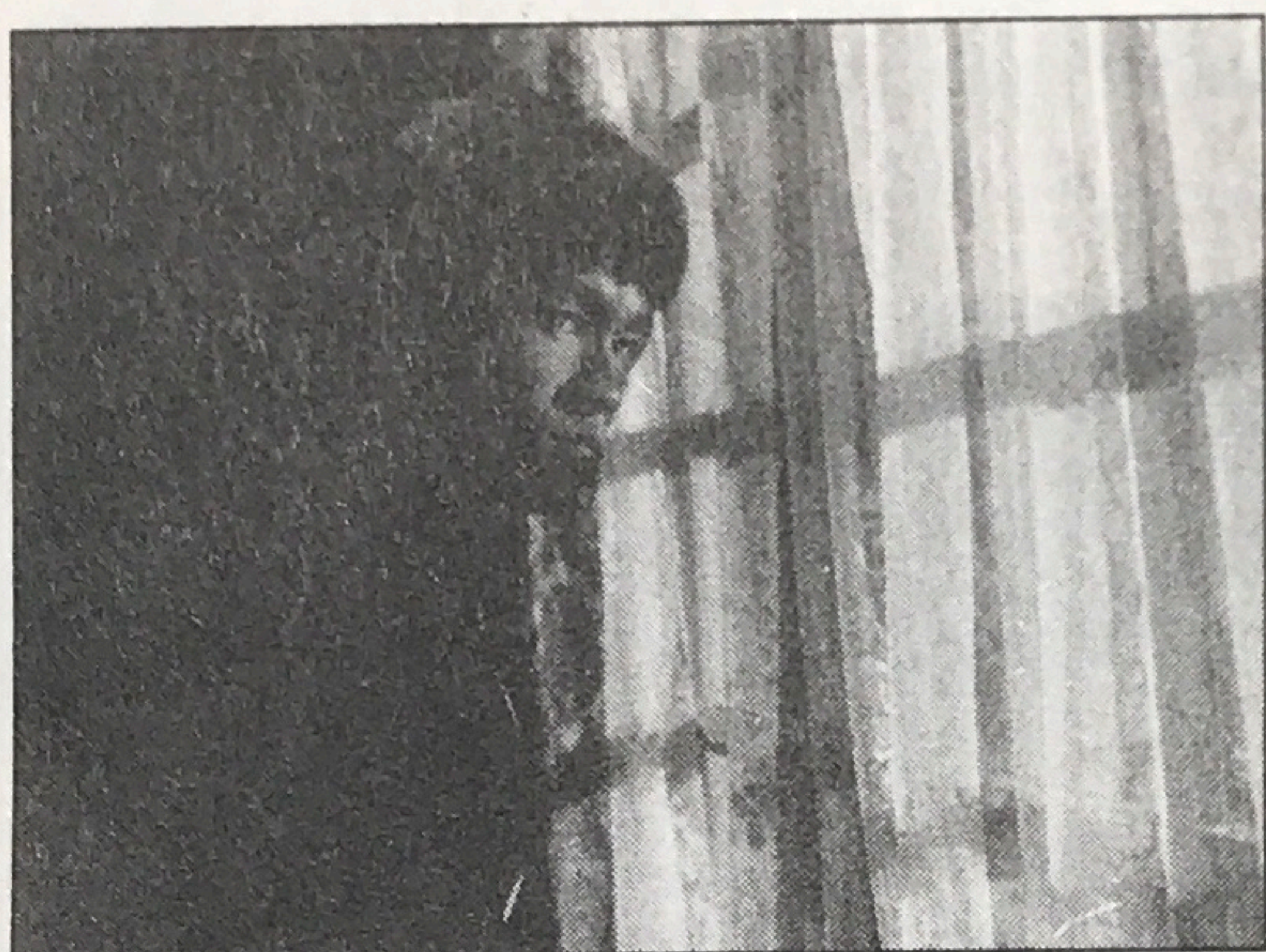
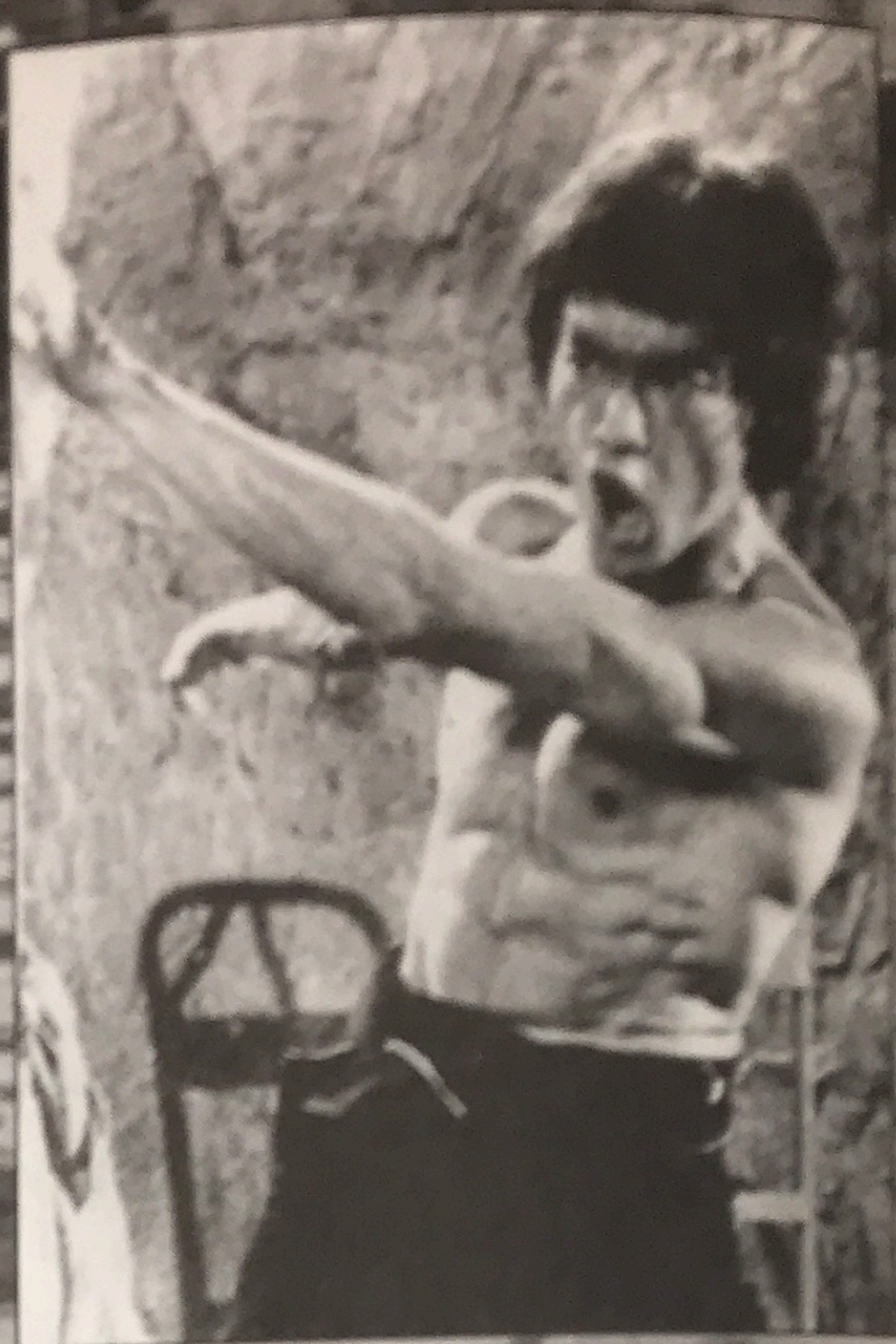
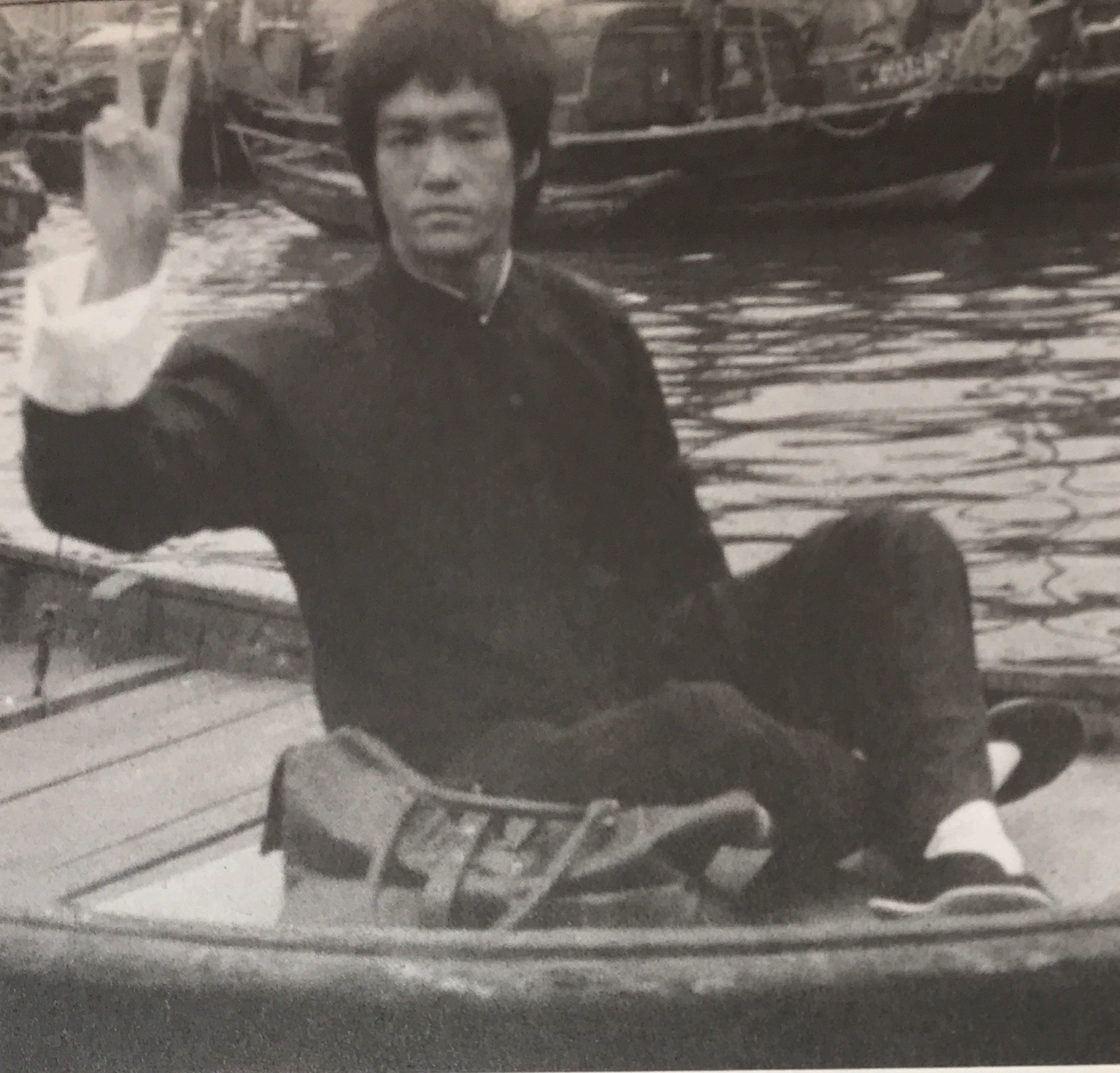
**IK:** When you think back, what's the biggest thing about Bruce's personality that sticks in your mind?

**DP:** I guess his single mindedness. If he was interested in something he devoted his entire energy and talents toward coming the best in that. If it wasn't something he was interested in, he didn't spend anytime thinking about it at all. An obvious example would be his time he spent perfecting dancing, or the cha cha.

**IK:** Taky Kimura has mentioned to me you spent a summer in Hong Kong with Bruce. Do you have some stories about your experiences with him?

**DP:** It was the summer of 1963. When I stepped off the plane the first thing I noticed was the smell. Hong Kong definitely had an odor that was distinctive. Swarms of people filled the sidewalks. At the first meal at the Lee table I trotted out my best manners. I sat up straight, raising my soup spoon to my mouth





with careful care not to make any sounds. After a few minutes Bruce leaned over and whispered, "Make a little noise."

Bruce used to take delight in faking fights with me in front of onlookers. We practiced the routine of two roundhouse swings from me which he blocked with his forearms, then a stiff uppercut to my stomach which I had to make sure I tightened in time.

In Bruce's younger days when he got into more trouble, he sometimes would act like a geek and let a street punk goad him. When the punk swung, Bruce would block it awkwardly and snap his groin with an incapacitating blow that appeared to be an accident. As the punk rolled in pain, Bruce would cover his mouth with his hand, tittering like a fairy and swish off. "A person can accept being beaten by someone stronger or bigger than he is," Bruce would explain, "but if he's been beaten by a wimp, he'll be pissed off for the rest of his life."

**IK:** Did you meet Yip Man, or any of his Wing Chun friends?

**DP:** Yes I met Yip Man. I went and watched he and Bruce work out several times. I had to pretend I didn't know anything. He didn't want anybody knowing in Hong Kong, particularly Yip Man, that he was teaching non-Chinese at that time. They mostly did chi-sao. There were no other students present. The two would go at it for long periods of time. Every other encounter I had seen Bruce in he totally

dominated his partner, but in this case their skills seemed equal.

**IK:** Was Bruce still recognized from being a child star in Hong Kong?

**DP:** No, not that I noticed. He obviously knew a lot of people in the movie business, but he didn't get mobbed or anything while walking down the streets.

**IK:** When Bruce started to knock traditionalist in the late sixties were you aware of his controversial standing in the martial arts community?

**DP:** Yeah. Mostly through Bruce. When we left Hong Kong to go back to Seattle we went through Honolulu. Once we were out of Hong Kong he didn't care whether anyone knew he was teaching non-Chinese or not. We gave a demonstration in a gung fu school where there was at least fifty students who were all Chinese. After the demo a lot of the senior students came up and asked me if Bruce was teaching non-Chinese. I told them he was.

One guy challenged him. He came up to Bruce with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth, and started asking questions regarding his technique. He asked Bruce how he would block a straight kick. Bruce offered to demonstrate. The man kicked at groin level and Bruce blocked it with a slapping palm block, then relaxed to resume his verbal explanation. The man kept

his leg extended after the block, and flicked his foot feebly in after Bruce had withdrawn his hand.

"See," the man said, "you were open there." Bruce was smoldering, but he was adept at handling trouble makers without hurting them. He continued his exposition and offered to demonstrate a different block. The man obliged and threw a punch, but of course this time Bruce did not withdraw after blocking it. Instead he trapped it, and followed up with a counter of his own, just slow enough for the fellow to block it with his free hand. Bruce grabbed the second hand with a lap sao (grabbing hand) and pinned both the man's arms. The force and speed of the second pull was so great that the man's cigarette went flying out of his mouth as he was jerked forward. The whole time Bruce continued calmly explaining each move to the growing audience. He could demonstrate his technique was much better without actually hitting anybody.

I know there were plenty of other instances when people in other gung fu schools didn't like the fact he was teaching non-Chinese, or his comments about classical gung fu being too rigid. I'm sure he made a lot of enemies in the gung fu world.

**IK:** When was the last time you saw Bruce?

**DP:** The last time I saw Bruce was about a year before his death. I was living in Japan, and was in Hong Kong on business. I had not seen Bruce in several years. As far as I knew he was still in L.A. trying to break into movies. I remembered his family with fondness, so I tried to look them up. The old apartment on Nathan road was being used as a nursery school. No-one knew where the Lee family had gone.

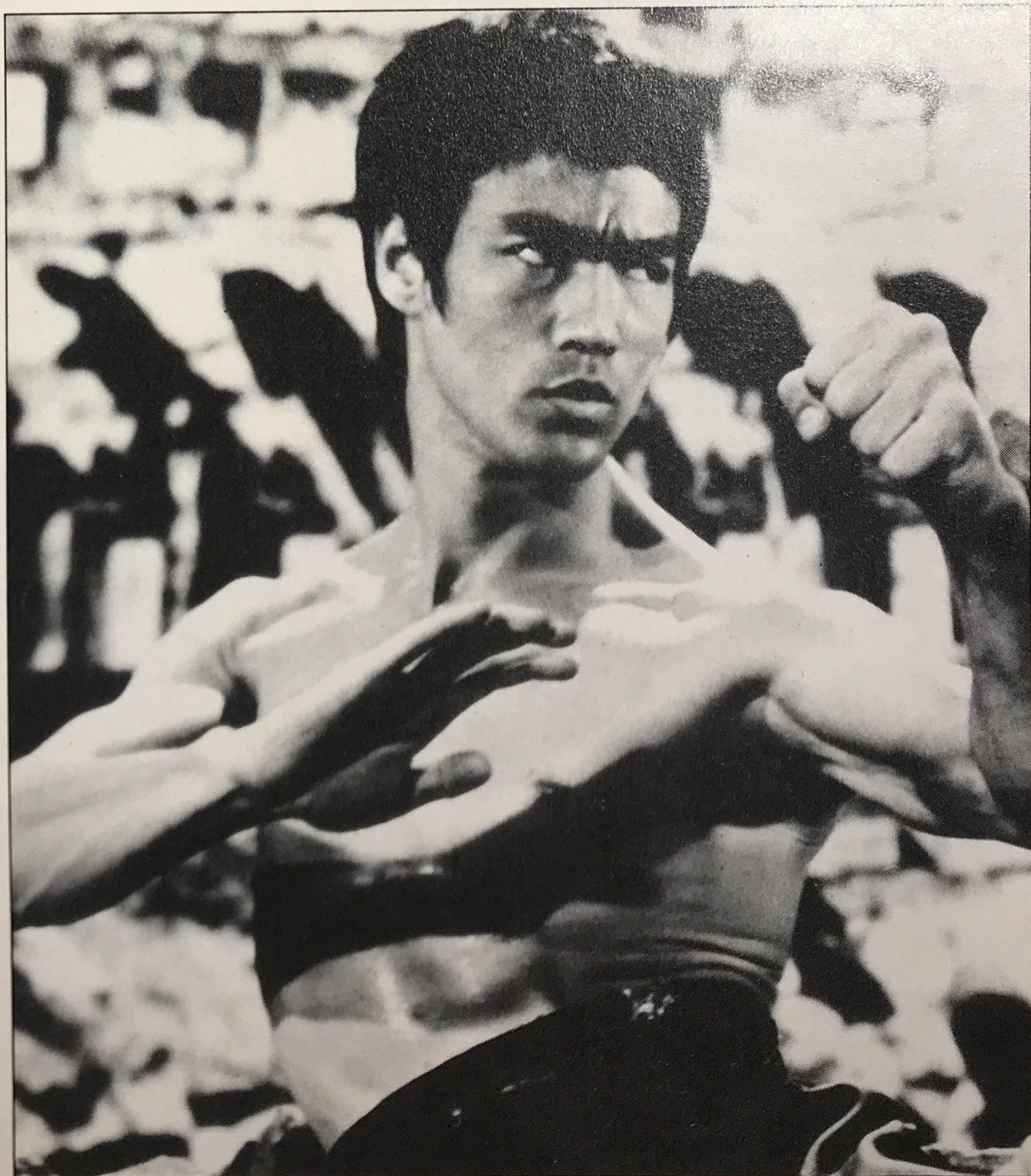
Finally, I mentioned to an accountant friend I was looking for Bruce Lee. He held up a poster of Bruce from his second movie doing a flying side kick. I was the only one in Hong Kong who didn't know he was back there. Bruce of course wasn't listed in the phone book. I called the studio he was working for and left my name and number.

Five minutes later my phone rang. "You son of a gun," Bruce yelled when I answered. "What are you doing in Hong Kong?" He and Linda picked us up and took us back to the huge house he was building in an exclusive part of town called Kowloon Tong. A minor incident when we were at his house showed Bruce's generous side. In looking through his mail he read a letter from his old friend James Lee from Oakland. I could see Bruce frowning as he read, then I heard him whisper to Linda to send James \$500.00. Bruce told me later that James was dying of cancer.

**IK:** Did he discuss his latest thoughts on the martial arts?



**"The last time I saw Bruce was about a year before his death."**



**DP:** Oh yeah. He brought me up to date on what he was doing in gung fu, and at that point he was really into conditioning. He gave my wife and me a screening of his latest movie and took us to the set. Kareem Abdul Jabbar was just there filming, so he told us some stories about that. Bruce was very happy with the way the scene had turned out, in contrast to a scene where he had flown in a well known martial artist from Korea.

He was very disappointed about the caliber of the man's martial arts. We had talked about getting together after my stint in Japan was over, but within a year or less he was suddenly dead.

**IK:** Did Bruce explain the inner workings of JKD to you?

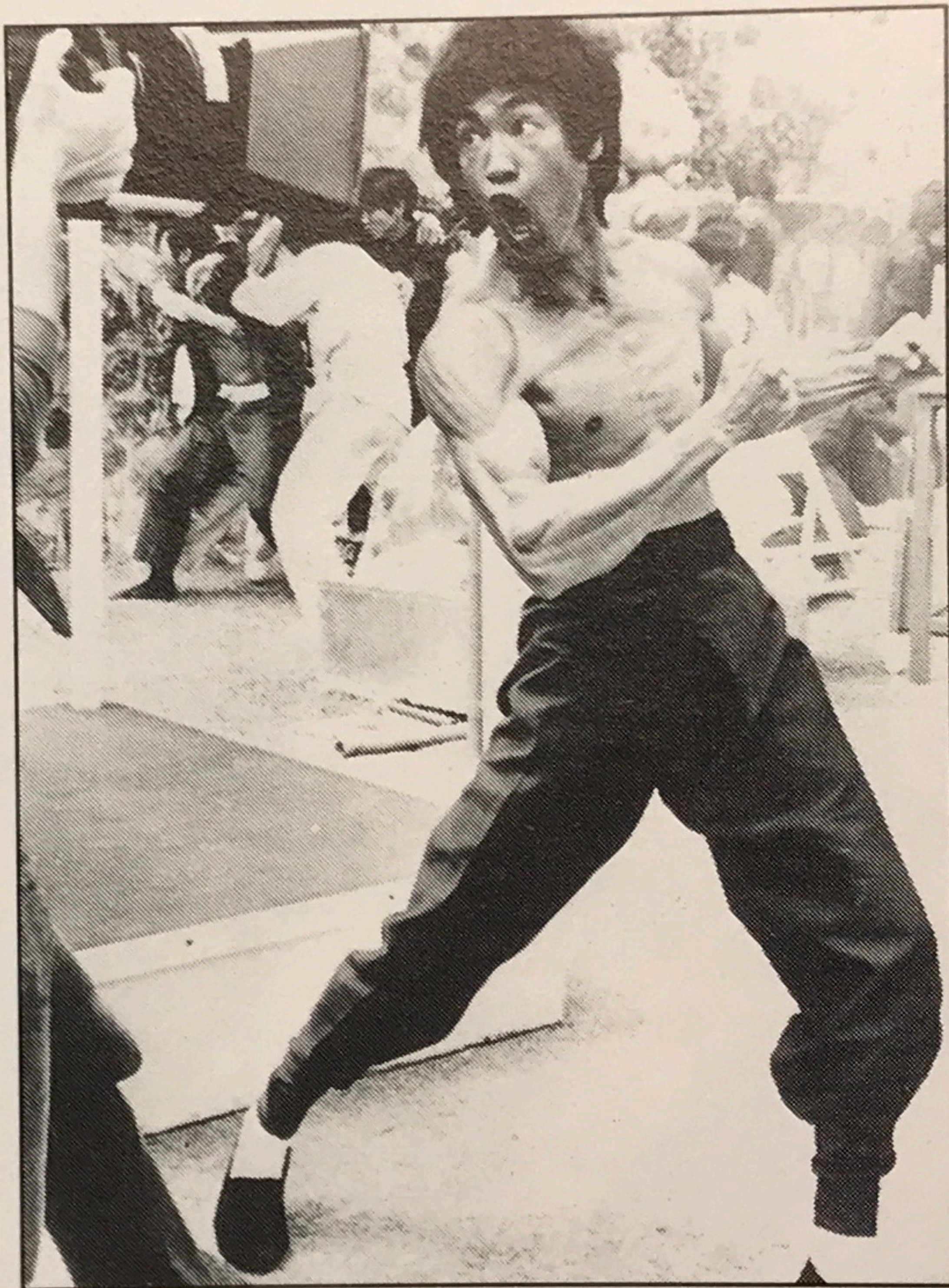
**DP:** He stayed away from a definition of it, because that would be too constraining. I think JKD to him was more of an evolving thing, an approach more than a system. We certainly talked about it, and he explained what he was thinking.

**IK:** Did he stress intercepting as the overall theme of JKD?

**DP:** I don't recall specifically, but obviously the meaning of JKD means "the way of the intercepting fist". I guess I have to assume if there was a core philosophy or approach that would have to be a key part of it.

**IK:** Did you two actually work out when you met for the last time, and could you see a difference between his skill then as opposed to the early sixties?

**DP:** We didn't spar, but he showed me a lot of things. In terms of speed or power, fluidity, no. He was so good, and so far ahead of anybody else I knew I certainly couldn't see a difference in those categories. In terms of his overall approach, he had a more cohesive, systematic view of things.



**IK:** Where were you when you found out about Lee's passing, and how did it affect you?

**DP:** I was in Japan. It hit me like a ton of bricks.

**IK:** If Bruce were still with us, what do you think he'd be doing now?

**DP:** I don't know. I have to assume he'd be doing movies. I'm sure he'd be first and foremost a martial artist. I'd assume he'd still be in the entertainment industry also.

**IK:** Do you think he would ever go ahead with his idea of a chain of gung fu schools again?

**DP:** I don't think so. I kind of doubt it. That was something he was thinking at one stage in his life. Once he started clicking with the movies, that took one hundred percent of his attention. I don't think he had a particular desire, or need to have schools with his name all over them.

**IK:** Have you seen *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story*?

**DP:** No. I've heard of it, though I have not seen it. I have some questions about what I've heard about it though. From what I hear they kind of pretend that the Seattle period didn't exist. It's kind of strange to try to tell the story of Bruce Lee, and not mention the key stages of his life [laughs]. Linda didn't meet Bruce until the end of Seattle period. It would have been 1964 at the earliest. He had already been there a number of years. The school by then had built up to way beyond working out in someone's backyard. He had formal classes, and everything then.

About the author:

Paul Bax is a freelance writer who publishes a newsletter which strictly deals with Bruce Lee and his art of JKD. For more information send a SASE to: JFJ, 4728 East Swallow, Imperial, MO 63052.